CURRENTS

SPRING 2025

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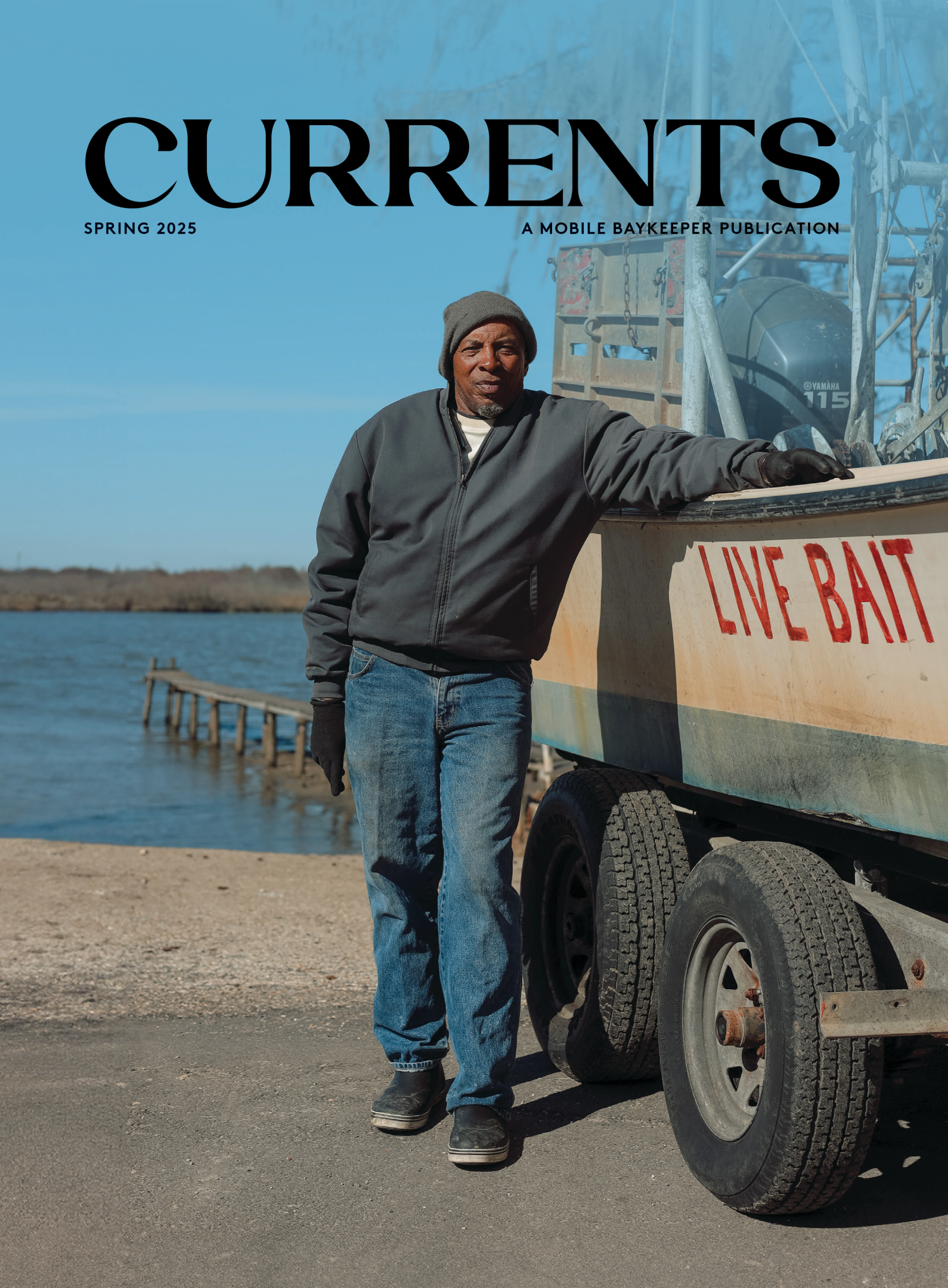

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IN THE SHADOW OF THE SPILL

Oil from the Deepwater Horizon oil spill approaches the coast of Mobile, Ala., May 6, 2010. Public domain

It's been fifteen years since the Deepwater Horizon oil rig suffered a blowout and spilled five million barrels of crude oil into the waters of the Gulf of Mexico. The 87 days that followed the explosion on April 20, 2010 — forty miles off the coast of Louisiana — left residents gripped in a white-knuckle, teeth-grinding frenzy, as the slick continued to grow and approach the coast like some kind of atavistic, sci-fi horror show.

By the time The Great Blob was finally contained, it had affected 70,000 square miles of the Gulf, roughly the size of Oklahoma. It was the worst industrial disaster in U.S. history by volume. To this day, the extent of ecological damage is unknown.

At the time it went down, the explosion and its ensuing spill wasn't nearly as surprising as BP's seeming inability to stop it. Three months is a long time to watch Anderson Cooper report on scenes of utter devastation coming out of your own backyard. Less than two months after the explosion, BP, which had leased the rig from drilling contractor Transocean, had even stooped to soliciting suggestions on its website for ways to stop the flow.

For anyone who loved the Gulf and called it home, or had even enjoyed a Bushwhacker at the Flora-Bama during a Spring Break in the long ago, the spill was a major wake-up call. There was a period in those three months where Life As We Knew It on the Gulf Coast might conceivably be over.

Thankfully, that didn't happen. Fifteen years later, we are more vigilant about threats to our waters, and, in many ways, ecological efforts are more robust. The 2012 RESTORE Act helped lead remediation efforts, and NOAA has been stalwart in their efforts at restoration. Safety standards have reportedly improved at rigs since Deepwater Horizon. But are we truly protected from another major spill — who knows?

Ninety-seven percent of offshore oil and gas drilling in the U.S. happens in the Gulf, and, currently, only a fifth of the Gulf's 2,200 active leases are in operation, due to a large production supply and the high costs of drilling, according to the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, a federal agency that manages offshore oil production.

It's clear that drilling in the Gulf will be around for some time, baby. Let's hope the regulatory and safety framework remains intact as well. Nobody wants a sequel.

— Caine O'Rear
Editor, CURRENTS

BEHIND THE COVER

THEY CALL HIM DROOPY Droopy Williams grew up in the Delta in a cabin on the Tensaw River at Cloverleaf Landing. For nearly six decades he has been a shrimper for the bait shops along the Causeway. Today he still lives at Cloverleaf, just up the road from where he grew up, shrimping in the morning and fishing for bream most afternoons. Read more about his life on the water on page 26. *Cover photo by Courtney Mason*

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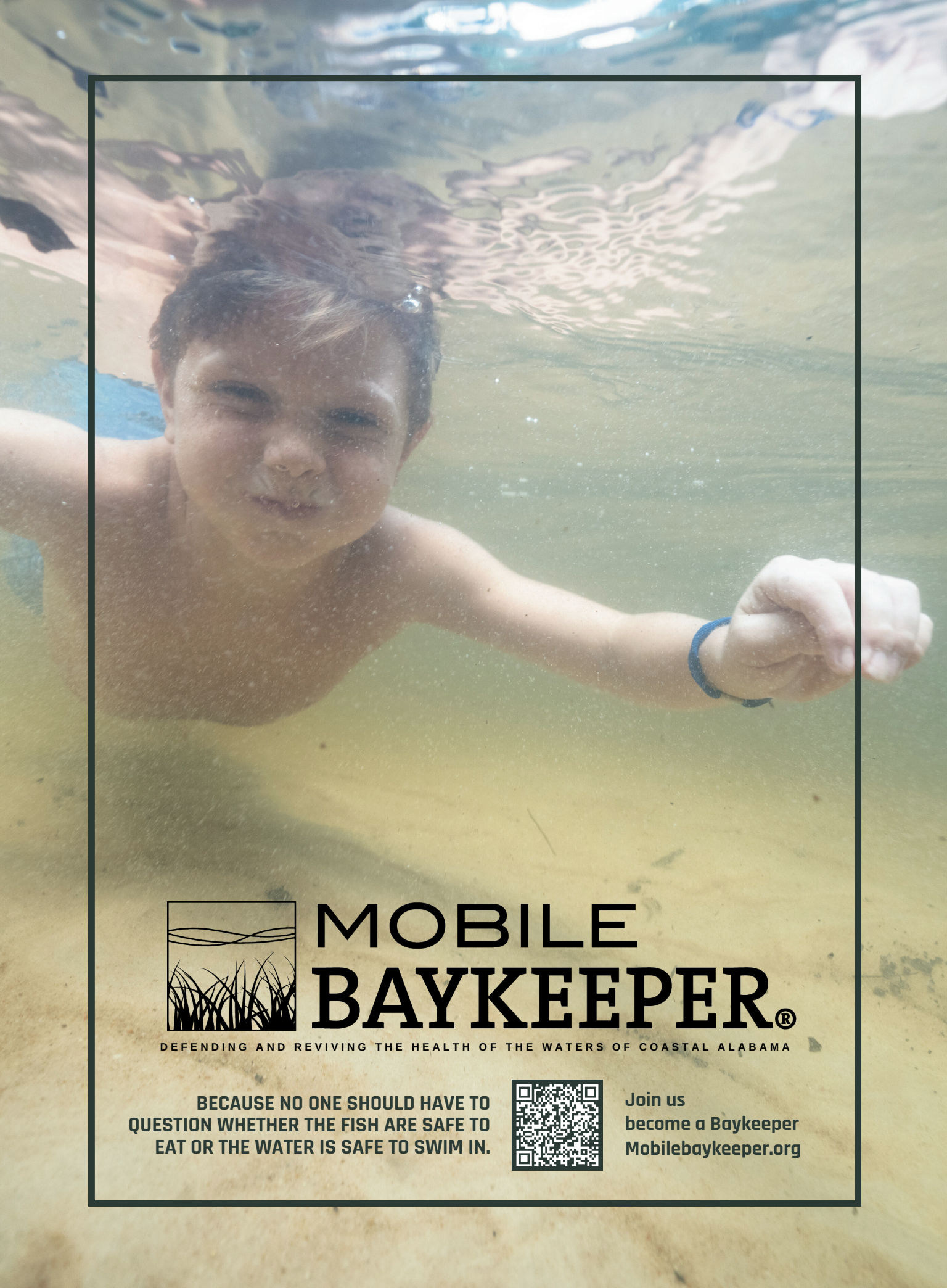

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Ghosts of the Delta

MEMORIES OF A WORLD WAR II ARMADA

by **JODY HARPER**

I was about eight years old when my granddad decided to take me on a discovery trip up into the Mobile-Tensaw Delta.

It was not a usual sort of outing for our family. He worked each day surveying ships anchored at the State Docks at the foot of Water Street, while my mother worked every weekday at Turner Supply Company and later at a local office of Merrill Lynch. My grandmother and I were relegated to household life in Midtown, with cyclical visits to the hairdresser or the farmer's market.

My grandad and my grandmother were fraught with a protective nature, so my childhood was an orderly and sheltered existence, though I realized if I listened closely, I might sometimes overhear of the fun and adventures my family had had before I came along. My grandfather had plenty of adventure in the work he had done, but he was close-mouthed about it. Most of the intriguing moments he'd had I only heard about incidentally from my mother and grandmother.

My grandfather, Capt. Marion Chester Smith, had a diverse work history, serving in the Merchant Marines. He was called upon once, while serving as first mate on a merchant ship, to deal with a Nazi submarine commander who had surfaced and demanded to check their ship's hold.

He later worked as a commercial airline navigator for, among other airlines, one owned by tycoon Howard Hughes. (I have guessed by his grin at the mention of it, that his favorite flight was one in which the beautiful Irish actress Maureen O'Hara was his passenger.) His captain's license included certification for navigation of sections of the Mississippi River, and though he had never attended college, he had an astounding knowledge of mathematics, celestial navigation, and enough knowledge of science to warn me that there is no law of physics or logic to justify the flight mechanisms of helicopters. He was shrewd and careful, and kept an iron grip on our family, a chattering society of girls that barely let him get a word in edgewise. (He once complained with a rueful smile that even the wire-haired-terrier was a female.)

Our boat trip into the Mobile River and on up into the Tensaw that day in the mid-1970s was literally a once-in-a-lifetime event, so it still astounds me when I think of it. (Our family outings together were usually Saturday luncheons at various Greek-owned restaurants complete with a good gin martini, a demitasse coffee with dessert, and some scamp almondine in between.)

The odd part of our trip was my grandfather's declared intention to go up by this little boat we rode on and set foot on historic Blakeley Island and look for arrowheads. As I recall, we never did find the right spot for arrowhead hunting.

But, as a sort of sidewise, offhand leg of the outing, we glided up underneath the huge, imposing shadow of the hulls of The Ghost Fleet, an armada of more than 300 World-War II supply ships that had been retired on the Tensaw. It was an awesome moment, being dwarfed by their vastness and the resounding stillness. The ships sat high in the water, the propeller blades just visible above that surface. They were empty of any cargo, light and unladen. My grandfather nodded up toward them and said to me, "You know, BigaDaddy was the one who mothballed them up here, after the war." I was still young, and just starting to understand what this term "mothball" meant, but I did know we stored our coats in a cedar closet that still held the scent of old mothballs.

At that age, I only knew that my great-grandfather, Capt. Charles Sumner Bodden, or "BigaDaddy," as he was affectionately nicknamed, had been a sea captain who immigrated to Mobile from Grand Cayman, British West Indies, with his wife, Nina, and their first child. He and his four brothers had formed Whitney-Bodden Shipping in the early 1900s and he sailed forth upon the mighty deep as the ship's master on their three- and four-masted schooners, shipping lumber to ports like Bluefields, Nicaraugua, and Havana, Cuba.

When my mother was a little girl, he would regale her with stories of his high-seas adventures while lathering his chin for his morning shave. But, by the time of the post-war scuttling of former World War II Liberty ships and tankers, he had retired from the second chapter of his life at sea, as a captain for Waterman Steamship Company, having voyaged to both Germany and Japan and other far-flung ports of call. He came home from one pre-war voyage and

told his eldest son of the scrap-metal shipments the U.S. was sending overseas, noting, "We're just shipping it over there so they can shoot it back at us." A deft appraisal, he made this long before the attack on Pearl Harbor.

At the time we glided past these old ships, I had no understanding of life at sea or World War II or shipbuilding in Mobile. My only marine experience was in learning to say "over" and "over and out" when speaking with my grandad when he called us from a ship-to-shore radio from Vietnam, since in the late 1960s he was a navigator for merchant vessels and aircraft that brought supplies to our military stationed there. He had taken me with him to visit one of the ships at the Port of Mobile when I was very young, and the steep climb up the gangway alongside the giant hull gave me a real sense of the massive scale of a ship's structure.

The Ghost Fleet, as it was called, was composed of the merchant vessels built for transporting goods and supplies to the Allies during World War II. After the war, these Liberty ships and tanker ships were retained in case they were needed for any possible military action in the future.

The Ghost Fleet was made up of merchant vessels built for transporting supplies to the Allies in World War II.

By the mid-1970s, the hulking ships, still strung together like metal pieces daisy-chained in a giant rust-encrusted bracelet, were far removed from their captains, crew, and the stories they'd once held. Newspapermen wrote romantic paragraphs about the vigilant old ships awaiting their destruction by metal scrappers in Panama City, Florida, or of their imminent sinkings masterminded by Alabama politicians dreaming of ways to use them to create new fishing habitats in the Gulf. Local boaters and recreational fishermen ogled them wistfully from the river they had been placed in by salt-wearied captains, including my great-grandfather.

The victory ships, tankers, and liberty ships embodied the American energy and toil that created them, with a ship being riveted or welded into existence at the Alabama Drydock and Shipbuilding Company with startling speed. Every two weeks, another ship would be launched out into the water to steam down into the Mobile Ship Channel and onward to the theatre of the high seas, be it Atlantic, Pacific, or other distant oceans involved in the war.

"I remember going to the launches at the foot of Eslava Street," recalls Will Haas, 93, who was just a boy when the war began. He watched as the ship would be sent sideways into the water when launched.

"The older ships were riveted when built, but later they started welding them … everyone was building the hell out of them." He noted that many people moved to Mobile to work in the shipyards, and that the pay for their labor was definitely worth the relocation.

Haas, who joined the Navy in 1952, came back to Mobile and in the early 1960s got involved in the salvage business through his father-in-law's marine surplus business. Eventually, he was active in salvaging various parts of these old ships of the ghost fleet when they were sent to the wrecking yards of Panama City. There, he harvested wire, turnbuckles, shackles, blocks, and other parts from the ships. In his collection, he has other items, like a brass binnacle with its compass and lanterns that were once a part of these working vessels.

The sheer number of wartime ships built by the United States overwhelmed the enemy. Germany, known for its technical prowess, could not produce warheads fast enough to torpedo the Allies' profusion of ships. The workforce of men and women that built these ships helped the Allies win the war. The men who served upon these ships and tankers, providing goods and fuel to the Armed Forces of the United States, risked and often gave their lives to assure the Allied victory. For years, The Ghost Fleet silently stood in tribute to this accomplishment of a nation focused on the protection of our liberty.

An adult Little Blue heron in mating plumage at Meyer Park in Mobile

Silenced Sanctuary

AN ELEGY FOR A LOST ROOKERY

text and photos by **SUSAN ROUILLIER**

The Little blue heron, a quiet bird of wetlands and coasts, thrives where food, shelter, and safety meet. Its soft blue feathers and sharp instincts make it a perfect fit for shallow waters — marshes, mangroves, tidal flats, and estuaries teeming with life. These places are cradles of existence, shared by countless species.

But the balance here is fragile. Near where herons once nested in peace, a rookery was destroyed. A pipe cut through their sanctuary, upending the ecosystem and silencing their breeding grounds. Industry erased not just a place but a life-sustaining home. The herons moved on, their absence a stark reminder of how quickly nature unravels when we fail to protect it. The loss invites us to marvel at these resilient birds — and mourn the spaces they've lost.

Green Legs, Toe "Teeth," and Tool Use

On their middle toe, the Little blue herons sport a row of "teeth" — a built-in comb for scratching their head, neck, and throat. Unlike other herons and egrets, they escaped hunters' guns; their muted blue-gray feathers offered a natural disguise. Smaller and darker than Great blue herons, they carve out their own quiet distinction.

Often mistaken for Snowy egrets in youth, Little blue herons wear white feathers and green legs as adolescents. Their diet is an eclectic buffet of frogs, crayfish, fish, and insects — anything small and wet. Nesting in colonies with other wetland birds, they lay three to six eggs per clutch. Spring brings a dramatic transformation: both sexes sprout vibrant chest and back feathers, with spiky, punk-rock purple plumes crowning their heads. Females, ever so subtly, keep their colors a shade quieter.

The World of Little Blue Herons

Little blue herons thrive in shallow waters no deeper than a wading knee, where they patiently stalk their meals. Clean, unpolluted waters are essential — not just for hunting but for the health of the small fish, amphibians, and invertebrates they rely on. Carnivores at heart, they feed with precision, standing statue-still or moving with a slow, deliberate grace to ambush prey.

Remarkably, these clever birds can use tools. I once saw one wield a stick, stirring the water to mimic movement. When curious fish swam closer, the heron dropped the stick and snapped up its meal — a quiet display of ingenuity. Not an accidental happening, I watched it repeatedly lure the fish with the same stick.

Vegetation is their sanctuary, especially for nesting. Dense mangroves, shrubs, or tall grasses near water offer safety from predators and shelter for their delicate nests. They breed in colonies, often in subtropical or tropical climates, sharing space with other wading birds. Their nests, tucked into trees or bushes, keep hatchlings close to abundant food sources.

These intricate habits reveal how deeply these herons depend on their environment. Protecting their habitats is vital to preserving the delicate balance that sustains them.

Why Protect Bird Habitats?

Protecting bird habitats isn't just science — it's a matter of conscience. Birds are tied to the planet's health, their survival bound to the ecosystems we all depend on. To protect their habitats is to honor our duty as caretakers of the Earth. It ensures future generations inherit a world still alive with the richness we were given. Around the globe, people and governments work to save these spaces. Their efforts remind us of the shared responsibility we bear to protect the natural world — not just for ourselves, but for every living thing.

They pollinate plants, spread seeds, control insects, and keep the cycles of life moving. Migratory birds tie distant ecosystems together, keeping forests, wetlands, and other places alive and healthy. They protect crops from pests and stop imbalances before they start.

Without birds, the system breaks. Biodiversity suffers, and so do we. Protecting their habitats isn't just for them — it's for the balance of nature and the survival of our own way of life.

It's Our Job

Some people and organizations go to great lengths to protect bird habitats, showing the moral weight of conservation. The Cornell Lab of Ornithology stands out. For decades, they've led the way in bird conservation through research, education, and outreach. They've raised awareness, driven change, and seen real success.

One of their key efforts is eBird, a program that invites ordinary people to report bird sightings. These observations help scientists track bird populations and measure the damage of habitat loss. By involving the public, Cornell reminds us all that protecting bird habitats isn't someone else's job — it's ours.

Death of a Local Rookery

In the spring of 2019, along the Alabama Birding Trail site called *Blakeley Island — South Blakeley Disposal Area*, 1200 Cochrane Causeway, there was a sanctuary. About 300 yards from this site's entrance on the south side of the dirt road was a beautiful rookery of Little

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Little blue herons cautiously venture out on their own

Pair of Little blue herons in mating plumage

Three-week-old hatchlings still in the nest

blue herons. The rookery consisted of a 250-foot oblong pond surrounded by tall reeds and shrubby trees. Thirty-four nests of Little blue herons were cradled behind the fortress of six-foot reeds. A narrow gap in the reeds offered a glimpse, a secret window into their world.

Each week, I brought my ladder, climbing up to see and photograph the birds over the reeds. One nest holding five fragile sky-blue eggs drew me in. I returned to watch and photograph them every few days, capturing all stages of their life cycle: the eggs breaking open, life emerging in faint tremulous chirps with tiny, straining necks, chicks growing, then peeking out, and later — testing unsteady wings, and venturing to nearby twigs. One day, they took to the sky. This place was untouched, natural, a sacred wildness with soft cries of life rising like prayers.

When I returned months later, I was dismayed to see that the entire rookery was gone — the reeds were leveled, and the pond filled in. A huge dredge pipe now severed the heart of the rookery. The herons would not return. Those who worked there had known of the nests, the lives they held, yet no one stopped the machines.

That season alone, the herons might have brought 90, even 150 fledglings into the world. But now there is only silence and pavement where wildness once breathed — a haven erased for convenience. The rookery has never come back. Nor will it.

A Matter of Conscience

Such actions reflect a stark disregard for nature's fragile balance. The rookery wasn't just a home for the herons — it provided food, shelter, and breeding grounds for countless other species. Its destruction didn't just harm the herons; it rippled outward, eroding the stability of the entire ecosystem. The herons no longer return, a silent testament to what has been lost.

This act is a glaring reminder of the clash between human progress and nature's survival. Industry often takes, leaving little thought for what it destroys. In a world losing wildlife faster than it can heal, protecting what remains must matter — not just to conservationists, but to those shaping the land. When one thread is cut, the whole web unravels. Where is our reason? Where is our care? We know the cost. We can choose better.

Avery Bates, near Cedar Point Pier in Coden

SHELL SHOCK

THE LEGACY OF OYSTER-REEF DREDGING IN MOBILE BAY

by **RACHEL BALL, CASSIE BATES, AND EDMUND DAVIES**
photos by **COURTNEY MASON**

Driving from Mobile to Bayou La Batre, the landscape changes as you move from the multi-lane interstate of I-10 to the modest county roads, which eventually give way to shipyards and seafood processors. The way of life here is centered around water, with the bayou cutting through the city itself.

Avery Bates, a retired commercial fisherman and vice-president of the Organized Seafood Association of Alabama, embodies the Bayou way of life. Spinning tales in front of Graham Shrimp Co., Bates speaks passionately about the bays, waterways, oysters, shrimp, and fish he has known all his life. So much so that it becomes hard to distinguish between his life stories and the waterways he loves.

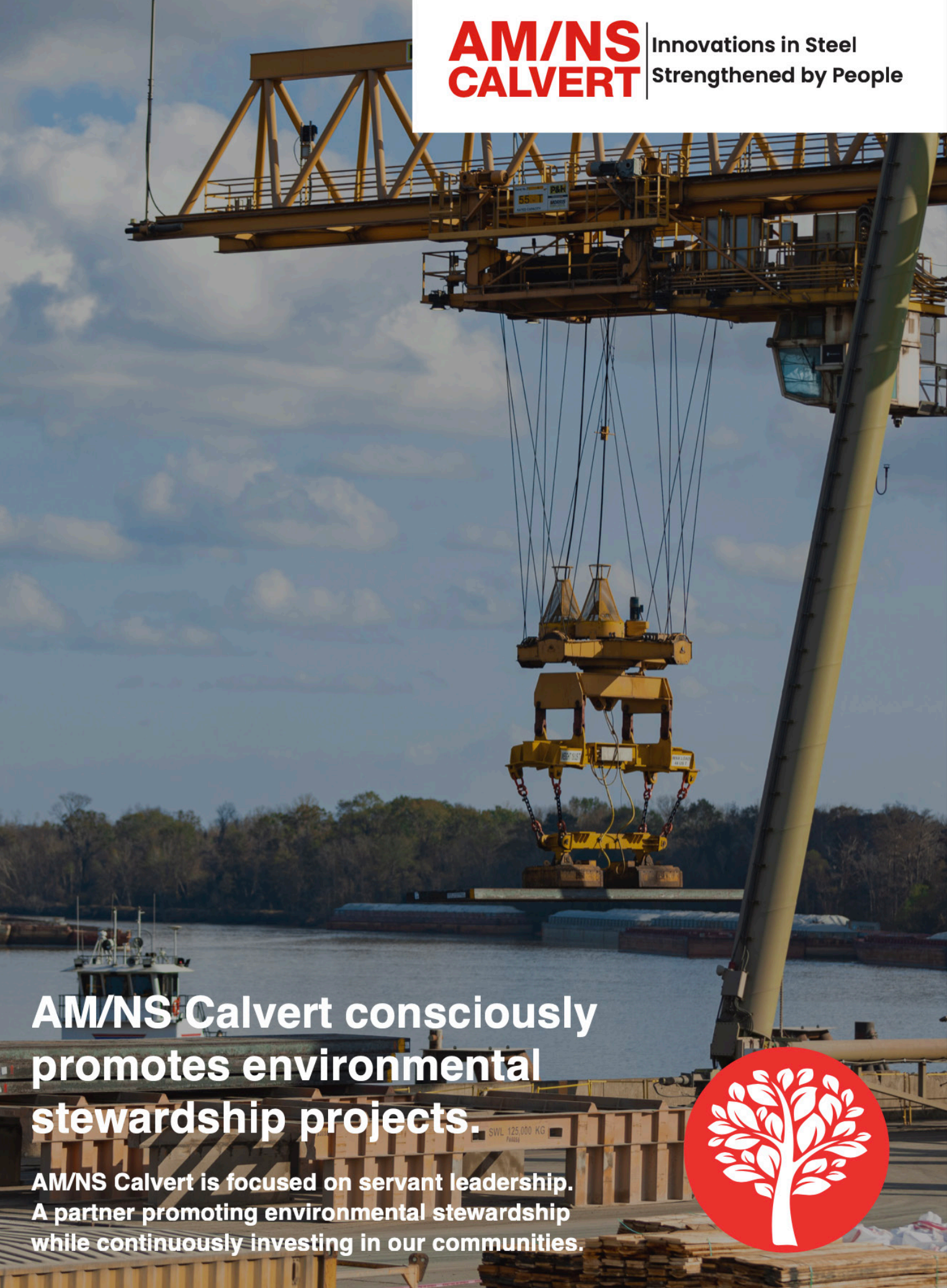
One of Mobile Bay's natural resources is the treasured oyster. Before the 1950s, oyster harvesting was a booming industry with millions of oysters being shipped all over the country each year, including those canned by Graham Shrimp Co. The food industry wasn't the only sector profiting from oysters; they were also being used for road construction, concrete, lime, and chemical production.

In 1946, Radcliff Materials (which became part of the Southern Industries umbrella through a merger in the mid-1940s, until Southern Industries was sold to Dravo Corp. of Pittsburgh in 1977) acquired permits from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to dredge 44 million cubic yards of relic oyster reefs — then valued at $46 million — in Mobile Bay. Shell-dredging continued, with the state of Alabama receiving more than a hundred thousand dollars in royalties each year from Radcliff's shell-dredging project up until 1982.

The 44 million cubic yards of relic oyster reefs dredged by Radcliff Materials from 1946 to 1982 — reefs that had built up over thousands of years — represented nearly 47 percent of the Bay's total historic reef footprint, according to a survey performed by Radcliff in 1971. Oyster reefs form complex interstitial networks which build on the foundations of oyster generations before them. Dead shells and even buried shells support this matrix to prevent surface reefs from sinking in the face of hurricanes or becoming buried due to sedimentation. Fossilized deposits in upper regions of the Bay, where salinities may have been too fresh, will likely become more viable as a foundation to support new oysters in the future, as studies indicate that pressure from climate change is leading to a gradual inland retreat of oysters.

Two dredge vessels, the "Mallard" and the "Gull," began operations for Radcliff in north Mobile Bay in 1946. The vessels worked by sucking in bottom material, including the relic shell-layer, separating the reef material, blowing out the sediment, and leaving troughs and valleys in their wake. This method of removal created siltation in the water column, decreasing oxygen and sunlight and making it difficult for oysters to survive.

The mass excavation of these reefs over time had a deleterious effect on the livelihoods of those who worked in Coastal Alabama's commercial seafood industry, includ-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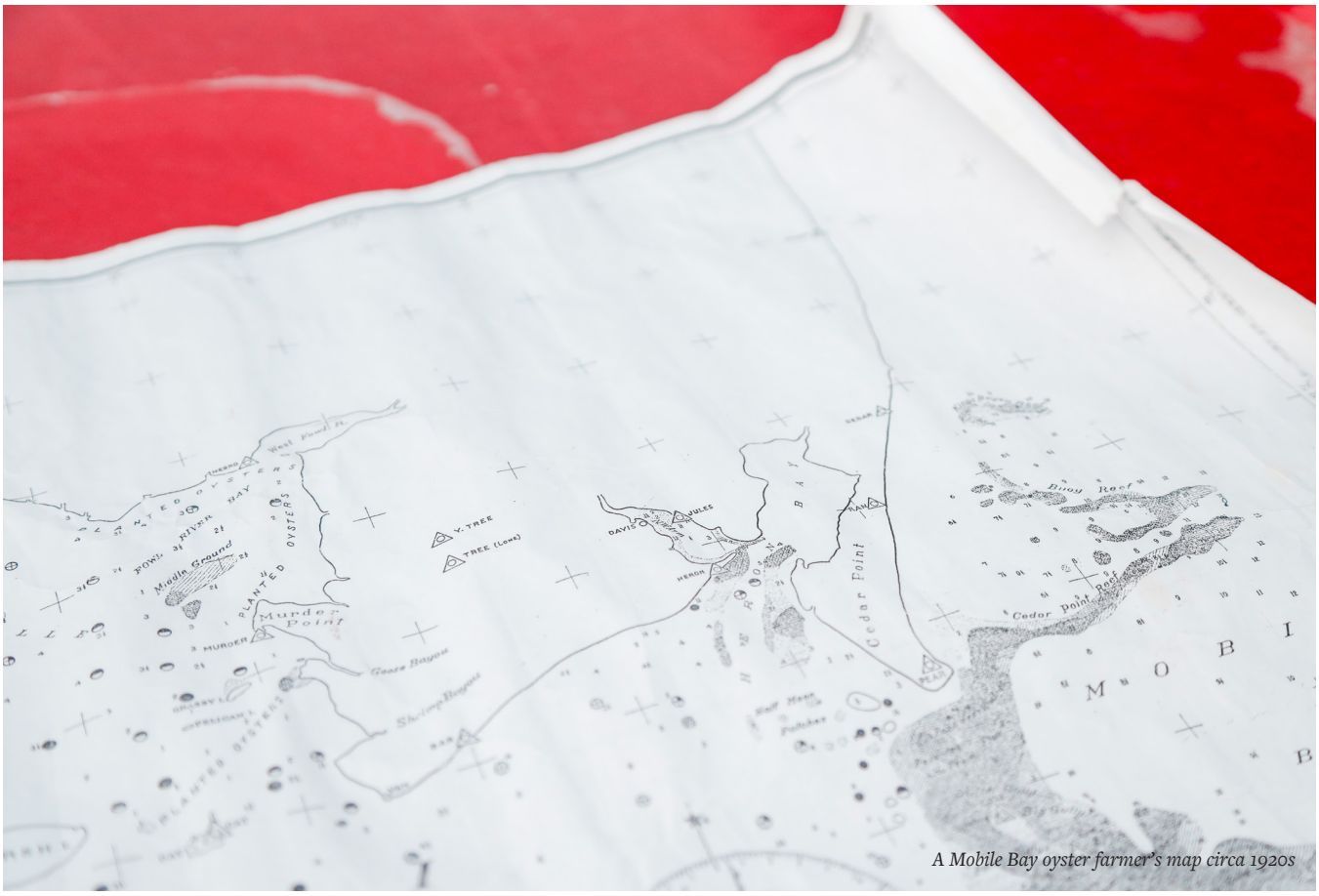


A Mobile Bay oyster farmer's map circa 1920s

ing Graham Seafood Co., who stopped canning oysters in 1963 and started focusing on frozen shrimp. As an oysterman, Bates' livelihood wasn't left unscathed either.

"What upset me, my daddy, and my papa was the destruction by Radcliff of the living reefs," says Bates. "It's the worst thing for a reef when you put silt on it. It suffocates everything."

By the 1970s, oyster markets stopped taking oysters that Avery harvested near shell-dredging efforts because they were filled with silt and not marketable.

Radcliff may have employed a couple hundred people, but Avery remembers there being 300-plus oystermen working the reefs and more than 50 shops processing oyster harvest in the 1970s.

"Think of the magnitude of the families that were fed from this line of work," he says with some resignation. "My step-papa had ten kids. Five of them opened oysters and five of them caught oysters. Any of them that got old enough to have young'uns got in line with the trade just like my family, my daddy, and those before him."

Because a healthy fishery depends on it, dredging has a cascade effect when you remove a key habitat like oyster reefs. Oyster reefs attract species like crab, shrimp, fish, and help the growth of seagrass. Bates explains that oystermen hollered the loudest because oysters can't swim away from stress, and they are foundational to everything else.

"What upset me, my daddy, and my papa was the destruction by Radcliff of the living reefs. It's the worst thing for a reef when you put silt on it. It suffocates everything."

— AVERY BATES, RETIRED COMMERCIAL FISHERMAN

Bates notes how important it is to build oyster reefs back; not only for an oysterman's business needs, but because, he says, "This fellow likes to eat fish, this fellow likes to eat oysters, this fellow likes to eat crab, and this fellow wants oxygen in the water so you don't have a jubilee every week." Oystermen have perhaps been affected first and foremost, but other species in the Bay — as well as other seafood industries — have seen impacts as well.

While the oystermen might've hollered the loudest, there was a widespread public concern over shell-dredging in the Bay. This led to Radcliff moving out of Mobile Bay in 1982 and focusing on other projects in Louisiana.

In 1983, Louisiana's Attorney General William J. Guste Jr., along with several organizations in New Orleans, sued the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for not providing an environmental assessment regarding Louisiana shoreline shell-dredging. (Environmental Impact Statements were first required by law in 1969, when the National Environmental Policy Act was enacted.) Because of this lawsuit, Radcliff could not continue their dredging projects in Louisiana.

In 1984, Radcliff requested new permits from the Corps to resume shell-dredging in Mobile Bay. Many had concerns about Radcliff's request. The president of Mobile Bay Audubon Society, Myrt Jones, wrote to the Corps about these concerns, stating that "the scuttlebutt regarding why Radcliff moved out of the Bay about 2

years ago was [that] it was uneconomical to recover what 'poor shell' there was left. Why then since we finally got them out of our bay are we having to consider this devastating proposal."

Jones ended her letter requesting that "Hopefully the state/federal agencies will just out-right deny the permit 'in the public interest.' These are 'public lands' and should receive every protection." The Corps ultimately denied Radcliff's request, ending oyster shell dredging in Mobile Bay.

Although shell-dredging left sizable scars, it's not the only factor that contributed to diminishing oyster reefs. The decline of natural oyster reefs is a complex issue and there are many factors, both natural and man-made. Some examples include changes to natural river-flow, hurricanes, predation from oyster drills, over-harvesting, and erosive wave energy. Loss and degradation of habitat and water quality from urbanization, port expansions, and wastewater discharge also played a role.

Bates says oysters would not be in such decline if it was just natural factors affecting them; they have survived for thousands of years combating natural factors. It's the combination of natural and man-made factors that has caused such a rapid decline.

Within the span of three generations, the Bay that Avery's papa experienced, the one with cleaner water and plenty of oysters, has turned into the Bay that Avery knows now, with decimated oyster populations and water that isn't always safe to swim in. Yet there are those who are accepting the responsibility of preserving oyster populations in Mobile Bay. There are volunteer oyster-restoration projects and other groups creaing their own initiatives, as well as oyster-farming operations which continue to grow. These actions are contributing to oyster restoration in real and tangible ways — witness the living oyster-reef locations in the southern parts of Mobile Bay starting to bounce back.

Indeed, we have the responsibility to protect our remaining oyster reefs and restore what we once had. Avery Bates believes that. He is still fighting to protect Mobile Bay and its oyster population at the age of 75. Why?

"I've got two grandkids that like to come down and fish and eat oysters too," he says. "I want them to still be able to enjoy the bays and the bayous that we've always enjoyed."

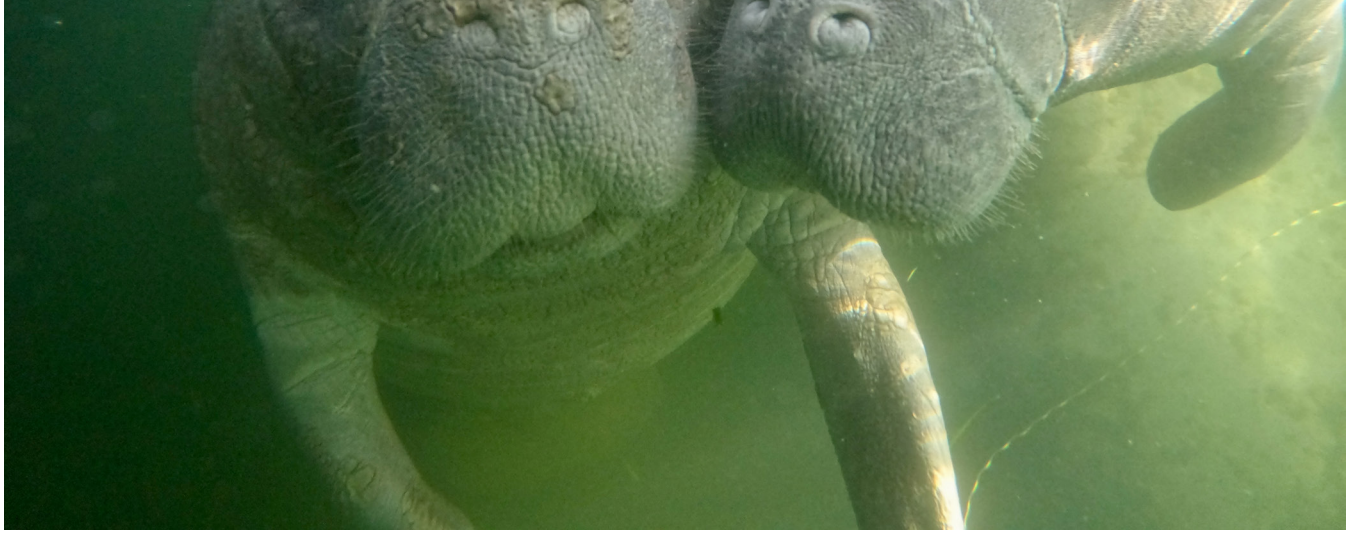
Edmund Davis prepares oysters for reef deployment as part of Mobile Baykeeper's Oysterkeeper program.

Learning From the Past

Management of natural resources has historically been an ambiguous pursuit, where it's often unclear if actions are protective of both resources and resource-needs. Man carries the responsibility of being Earth's stewards, which by design is a mutually beneficial relationship as our natural resources were once thought to be inexhaustible. However, this relationship is often abused and unequally skewed towards the demands of the steward. The story of relic reef management in Mobile Bay begs the question: At what point does the pursuit of our own prosperity eclipse the prosperity of nature? Does progress always have to beget the plight of our resources? I believe there is a way to achieve growth without sacrificing the resource; it just requires a shift in perspective.

We should not look at the mistakes of the past like the Radcliff shell dredging project as a reason to become apathetic and distracted from oyster restoration today. As responsible stewards, we must learn from the past and actively choose not to make the same mistakes. It is our duty to "build back" the oyster reefs, and many groups are already contributing to that goal. We have the responsibility to protect our remaining oyster reefs and restore what we once had, not just for ourselves, but for our community, our way of life, and for future generations. Our prosperity is inherently linked to the prosperity of nature.

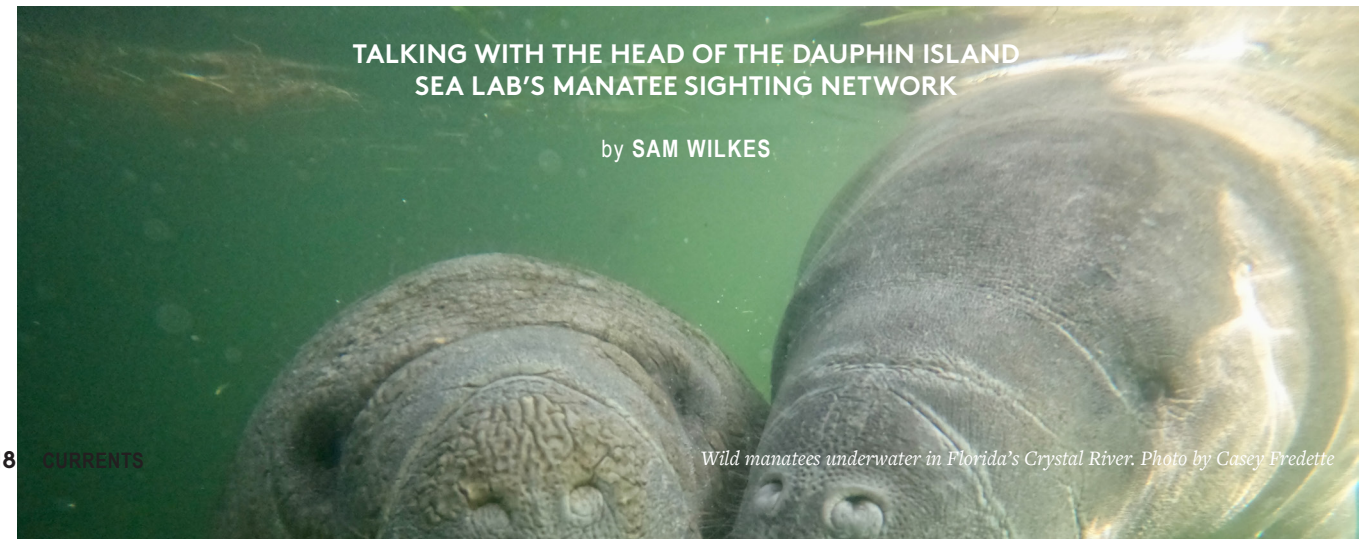
— Cassie Bates, staff scientist at Mobile Baykeeper



Sirens of the Sea

TALKING WITH THE HEAD OF THE DAUPHIN ISLAND SEA LAB'S MANATEE SIGHTING NETWORK

by **SAM WILKES**



Wild manatees underwater in Florida's Crystal River. Photo by Casey Fredette

People typically hear them before they see them, with that startling exhale blowing out above the water's surface. Though with my first manatee encounter, I saw a V-shaped wake swelling towards my in-law's floating mat before I knew what creature was emerging from Ole River. No visible dorsal fin, so it was clearly not a shark, but in that split second my mind did not allow for such rational thoughts. Neither did my sister-in-law's. She hurled a kid to safety and vaulted clear out of the water flat-footed onto the floating mat like Simone Biles. And anyone over forty who has tried to even climb onto a floating mat can appreciate the level of adrenaline needed for that feat.

After a brief panic, we then heard a spray of breath and saw a friendly snout peeking above the water line, instantly sending a message of peace to our anxious group. The grey mass proceeded to glide smoothly like a zeppelin under the crowded mat and further down Ole River out of sight. At the time, we did not know we should have reported the encounter. But that's changed.

In 2007, Dr. Ruth H. Carmichael, senior marine scientist at the Dauphin Island Sea Lab ("DISL"), established the Manatee Sighting Network ("MSN") in response to a request from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for more research on manatees in our area. "Our goal, for the most part, has been to dive deeply into the mechanistic understanding of what the manatees are doing, when and why," says Carmichael.

The MSN focuses on manatees but is part of the larger Marine Mammal Research program run out of Carmichael's lab at the DISL. The network maintains a toll-free phone line, an e-mail address, and an interactive website to receive citizen sighting reports. The MSN then utilizes those reports, in addition to satellite telemetry-based tag data, habitat information, and modeling efforts, to better understand all facets of this curious creature's life in Alabama and nearby waters.

Fossil records show manatees in the northern Gulf of Mexico dating back to the Pleistocene era. In 1493, Christopher Columbus thought he had encountered three sirens or mermaids rising from the sea near what is now known as the Dominican Republic, not realizing he had documented the first recorded sighting of manatees in North America. Columbus noted in his journal, "They were not as beautiful as they are painted since, in some ways, they have a face like a man."

Today, such a mistake of identity seems bizarre, with our images of luring sirens and lovely mermaids with flowing hair contrasted with the slow, bulbous Eeyore of the sea. However, it was such a common mix-up that the scientific name for manatees is Sirenia, derived from the sirens of Greek mythology.

There are three species of manatees, with our region being home to the West Indian Manatee. Over the years they became largely confined to the Florida peninsula as their populations declined. Historically, Alabama waters were considered outside of their typical range. However, in recent years, there has been a significant increase in the number of manatees traveling around Mobile Bay and the Alabama coastal areas.

"The apparent recent changes in manatee distribution likely reflect range re-expansion due to a combination of population recovery and climate change, including an increase in mean sea-surface temperatures during the fall migration period, which allows more animals to move to areas outside of Florida and stay longer in the cold season," says Carmichael.

The MSN's first successful tagging of a manatee was in 2009 in the Mobile-Tensaw River Delta, an adult female they named "Bama." The tagging system involves a floating canister with an antenna tethered to a soft belt tied around the base of their tail, equipped with sonar, VHF, and GPS capabilities. Weighing less than one percent of their body weight, the tag is comparable to a person carrying a cell phone. Also, to not impede the manatee's movements, the tag is designed to break away if entangled or caught on an object. The tagging system can track a single manatee's movements for hundreds of miles, supplying valuable data about their habitat use and migration ranges.

While tags provide high-resolution location data, they are costly and relatively few animals can be tagged at one time. As a result, the MSN primarily depends on the public's sighting reports for its work. "Much of what we know about our local manatee population comes from sighting information shared from coastal residents," says Carmichael.

Manatees have been sighted in Mobile Bay year-round, but mostly during mid-March to mid-November, with the highest spike in numbers in mid- to late-summer. Manatees have even been reported as far north as the Claiborne Lock and Dam, about 70 miles north of Mobile. Manatees prefer fresh and brackish

shallow-water habitats close to submerged vegetation near shore, and based on the MSN's data from 2010 to 2019, manatees use and are sighted most frequently in the Mobile-Tensaw River Delta and Dog River areas of Mobile Bay.

Surprisingly, the manatee's closest living relative is the elephant, likely evolving from a common ancestor. And manatees are more independent than dolphins and other marine mammals; they tend to travel in herds when mating. "You may see a mother and calf pair, or two to three males who spend time together for a few days at a time, but their groups are not tightly constrained," says Carmichael.

Adults typically range from ten to thirteen feet in length and weigh over 1,000 pounds. The largest manatee captured in Alabama weighed 1,600 pounds. Even though they typically cruise in a Sunday-driving style of three to five miles per hour, manatees can accelerate to over thirty miles per hour if motivated. Nicknamed "sea cows," manatees are herbivores that eat a wide range of submerged and emergent vegetation, grinding down nearly 100 pounds daily.

"They will eat just about any vegetation they can get in their mouth, including lawn grass," says Carmichael. That helps in other ways as well, because manatees expel gas to control their buoyancy. They oscillate between eating greens and floating up with fibrous gas, to then letting one rip and descending back down to the submerged plants to feast again. Such a life.

"They are stealthy," says Carmichael, "and do not have anything like a fin that breaks the surface, so they can be very hard to see. But when swimming they make a series of voids on the water, known as 'plates.' Often you may hear them breathe before you see them, or you may see just the snout break the surface of the water." Manatees are very curious by nature, which can be harmful to their survival as they will sometimes approach boats to investigate. "The best practice while boating in our area is to simply be cautious, obey the 'no wake' zones, and be aware of any posted 'manatee habitat area' signage, because these are known areas where manatees are regularly sighted and are fairly well posted in Alabama waters."

Without natural predators, manatees can live to more than sixty years in ideal conditions, though an average life span is only ten to fifteen years due to the dangers posed by humans and the environment. Manatees are listed as "threatened" under the Endangered Species Act and "depleted" under the Marine Mammal Protection Act, but they remain listed as an endangered and top priority for conservation in the State of Alabama by the Alabama Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Program. Manatees need plenty of space and it is best to avoid actions that would alter their natural behavior. "The best rule of thumb is to stay at least 100 feet away," says Carmichael. "If you spot one, don't chase them, feed them, or touch them. Enjoy quietly observing them, give us a call as soon as possible, and we'll get to work."

When citizens call the MSN's 24-hour hotline, they have the option to choose non-emergency or emergency reporting, with the former being used for documentation of sightings and the latter for immediate response to animals in distress or stranded, alive or dead. In 2024, the MSN upgraded their website to make reporting easier for people using mobile phones and tablets to send photographs but also link their GPS location coordinates, which provides a higher level of accuracy for the tracking data.

As with most animals, water quality is critical for their survival. The MSN team sometimes finds plastic debris in the GI tract of the manatees. In January 2022, the MSN team documented a manatee that died in Alabama waters with a plastic bag obstruction in his esophagus contributing to his death. However, "in the northern Gulf of

Mexico, cold stress is the leading cause of death," says Carmichael.

Similar to humans, the chance of death for a manatee increases in waters below 68 degrees Fahrenheit. In 2015, the first manatee was successfully rescued in Alabama. The MSN team and their collaborators successfully evacuated the adult female, named "Magnolia," who was suffering from cold stress and sought refuge in Magnolia Springs, Alabama. She was transported to Sea World Orlando for rehabilitation, and after a full recovery, Magnolia was released into the wild near Crystal River, Florida.

Unfortunately, the year 2024 set a record for strandings and responses, says Carmichael. One of the recent manatee rescues also occurred in the upper areas of Magnolia River, where a nine-foot long, 855-pound male was lethargic and showing signs of cold stress. This rescue, on January 1, 2025, was the first manatee rescue in the country this year. Only two weeks prior, in mid-December, a manatee was rescued from the Theodore Industrial Canal of Mobile Bay for similar cold stress-related issues. Thanks to the work of the MSN and their partners, both adult males are now recovering at Sea World Orlando in critical care facilities. These recent rescues were made possible due to quick reporting to the MSN, which allowed for a rapid response.

In 1981, Jimmy Buffett sang on his album *Coconut Telegraph* that "Sometimes I see me as an old manatee/ Headin' south as the waters grow colder/ Tries to steer clear of the hum-drum so near/ It cuts prop-scars deep in his shoulder." A month after that album hit shelves, Buffett co-founded the Save the Manatee Club with Florida's then-Governor, Bob Graham, which continues to operate today. The research published by the MSN helps us better understand the manatee's movements and behaviors, aiding in the protection efforts spearheaded by our favorite native pirate.

"We have 20 years of amazing successes and truly new discoveries," says Carmichael. "The first documentation of a manatee using a ship channel as a migratory corridor was from our research here in Alabama. We were the first to document the change in distribution and recognize manatees as regular, or at least seasonal, visitors to our area (not accidental visitors) and to quantitatively document the relationship to climate variables."

The MSN currently is funded by the State of Alabama for basic operations for approximately three years, with annual supplemental funding from the USFWS for seasonal stranding response. The MSN also accepts donations for all aspects of its work.

"We are extremely grateful for the public support," says Carmichael. "Funding is always very tight, but we try to make the most of every dollar. One of the biggest challenges is funding for basic monitoring and stranding response, which doesn't fit under a specific research blanket, but supports everything we do and provides a service to the animals and the community. People also can volunteer to be part of our network of responders or to assist with outreach and education. Plus, we offer training at least annually."

As the manatee sightings and mortality reports continue to increase in our area, the MSN needs the public's support and input more than ever. The more we know about these docile creatures and their movements, the better we can coexist while utilizing our local waters. To report manatee sightings, the MSN team is available 24 hours, 7 days a week by phone (1-866-493-5803), email (*manatee@disl.edu*), or through the online sighting form on their website (*manatee.disl.edu*). To make a donation, or if interested in volunteer opportunities, please reach out through the website, or the email listed above. C

Molly Thomas, on the Eastern Shore

A Light That Never Goes Out

AFTER A NEAR-FATAL CAR ACCIDENT, MUSICIAN MOLLY THOMAS FOUND HER WAY BACK THROUGH MUSIC

by **VIRGINIA KINNIER**
photos by **COURTNEY MASON**

Born-and-raised coastal people tend to return to the water in one way or another, pulled back home with the tide, their lives and work ever reflecting the influence of the water.

Molly Thomas is the perfect example of this.

While her address may have changed over the years, the singer, songwriter, and musician has always been a child of the Gulf. Born in Ocean Springs, Mississippi, Molly spent most of her early years in Hattiesburg, Jackson, and Gulfport before she moved to Mobile in her twenties and eventually settled down in Point Clear after a stint in Nashville.

"I love it here," Molly says. "Even when I moved to Nashville, I always wanted to be back in this sacred space. I always felt like my spirit was here."

Within her music, Molly fully embraces her connection to the coast, like a child running toward a wave at the beach. Lyrics like "the ocean is in my veins" and "the sand sticks to my feet" shout her recognition of and appreciation for the environment that raised her.

No stranger to the live music scene, Molly has graced the stages of local haunts like Callaghan's in Mobile and the Book Cellar in Fairhope, while also checking off bucket-list appearances at the Ryman Auditorium in Nashville, El Ray Theatre in Los Angeles, and late-night appearances on David Letterman and the "Tonight Show" with Jay Leno. Her instrumentals and vocals have accompanied the work of other celebrated musicians such as Guster, Todd Snider, The White Buffalo, Matthew Ryan, and many more, and her music has also appeared in three films.

As a solo artist, Molly has released two albums and one EP, along with a full-length record with her band, Molly Thomas & The Rare Birds, called *Honey's Fury* (2019). In August of 2023, she was in the middle of recording her upcoming album with writer and producer Ken Rose when she almost lost her life in a near-fatal car wreck in Fairhope. Her car flipped several times, and she was life-flighted to Mobile with several broken bones, broken wrists, and numerous lacerations.

Today she is grateful to still be able to play and perform at all.

"I'm doing so much better, but I still have lingering issues from the wreck, like a rod in my strumming hand, which can make it a little stiff sometimes," Molly explains. "Mentally I can get overwhelmed easily by things, but I think trauma does that to you. I've also had some trouble remembering things, but I had that before the wreck so that might just come with age," she laughs.

During her recovery, Molly was plagued by other health issues, undergoing surgery twice, the first to remove her gallbladder. Homebound and forced to literally sit with her thoughts, there was only one thing she could do: write. And she had some new material to work with.

"When I was in and out of consciousness, being helicoptered to USA, I remember saying out loud, 'I want to live, I want to live,'" Molly recalls. "Until that moment I never knew I had that will to live or that I felt so strongly about it that I was ready to fight for it. It was really powerful."

In a new song, aptly titled "Crash," on her upcoming album, listeners get to experience that fight for life firsthand. The music lifts and lowers throughout, mimicking that rise and fall of consciousness as its propelled by something much more powerful than even the sounds themselves: her will to live.

"When I write, I try to make things more visual," Molly says. "That's the effort that I try to put into creating a soundscape to pull people in and have them feel and think about their own life. What kind of light can I bring or help people recognize in their own life?"

Listening to a sneak peek of the upcoming album, it feels infused by her recent traumatic experience, like the wreck itself was the cata-

Molly's Gibson Hummingbird

String section: Cello and violin

lyst for the entire work. Ironically, it wasn't.

"I was actually in the middle of recording the majority of the songs on the new album when I had the accident," Molly explains. "But so many relate to what happened that it's almost like it was some sort of premonition."

For example, her song "Even the Strong" flips the idea of a survival story around to show the backside of it, the dark underbelly where the realness and rawness of strength is exposed, as well as the limitedness of it.

"I wrote that song several years ago and finished it just before the accident, oddly enough," Molly says. "Even people who go through life and appear strong need somebody to lean on, a shoulder to lay their head on," Molly admits.

Luckily for Molly, she didn't have to go far to find that somebody.

"While I was in the hospital, Ken Rose, my co-writer, gave up everything he was doing and he came and stayed at our house and took care of our animals," Molly recalls. "When we started writing again, he would come over and we would sit and work out some songs, and it really helped, just being around somebody. I'm so grateful for our friendship and everything he did to help me during the healing process just by bringing his guitar over. I honestly cannot imagine having worked with anyone else."

Molly and Ken lucked upon the perfect spot for her self-described "indie swamp-pop" writing and instrumental sessions. Captain Tom Yeager of Fairhope lent them his home on Fly Creek, and the setting and characters found there greatly influenced their work.

Ceramic clay earrings from Molly's jewelry line

"We were in a house that sits very high in the trees, so we could look out over the creek and the Bay," Molly explains. "We were surrounded by birds and alligators and water and turtles, and there was so much of that feeling of nature that found its way into the writing."

The history of the area also seeped into the album, particularly in the song "1839," which is about a little section of land in Montrose called Ecor Rouge, which once served as the main port on the Eastern Shore in the 1800s. Potters would search along the beach in that area for clay to make milk jugs or containers for exporting things, a practice that Molly herself has taken up when collecting material for the ceramic clay earrings she creates by hand.

Back in the 1800s, the clay became such a significant resource that if you go to Fairhope today you can still see some of the structures that were made from the brick formed with that clay. Molly's first show following the traumatic events of her wreck and long recovery was a homecoming of sorts at one of these remaining clay-brick structures in the heart of Fairhope: The Book Cellar at Page and Palette.

"It was amazing and full of tears — happy tears — and so much support from the community," Molly recalls. "It meant the world, and it's something I need to remind myself of more often because it was another spiritual moment with an audience, a communion, a give-and-take with people of their excitement and joy that we were able to play again. It's hard to even talk about because words don't really describe it well enough."

Experiences like the homecoming show at the Book Cellar have served as lampposts in Molly's journey back to music, not only lighting the path but brightening her resolve to continue down it.

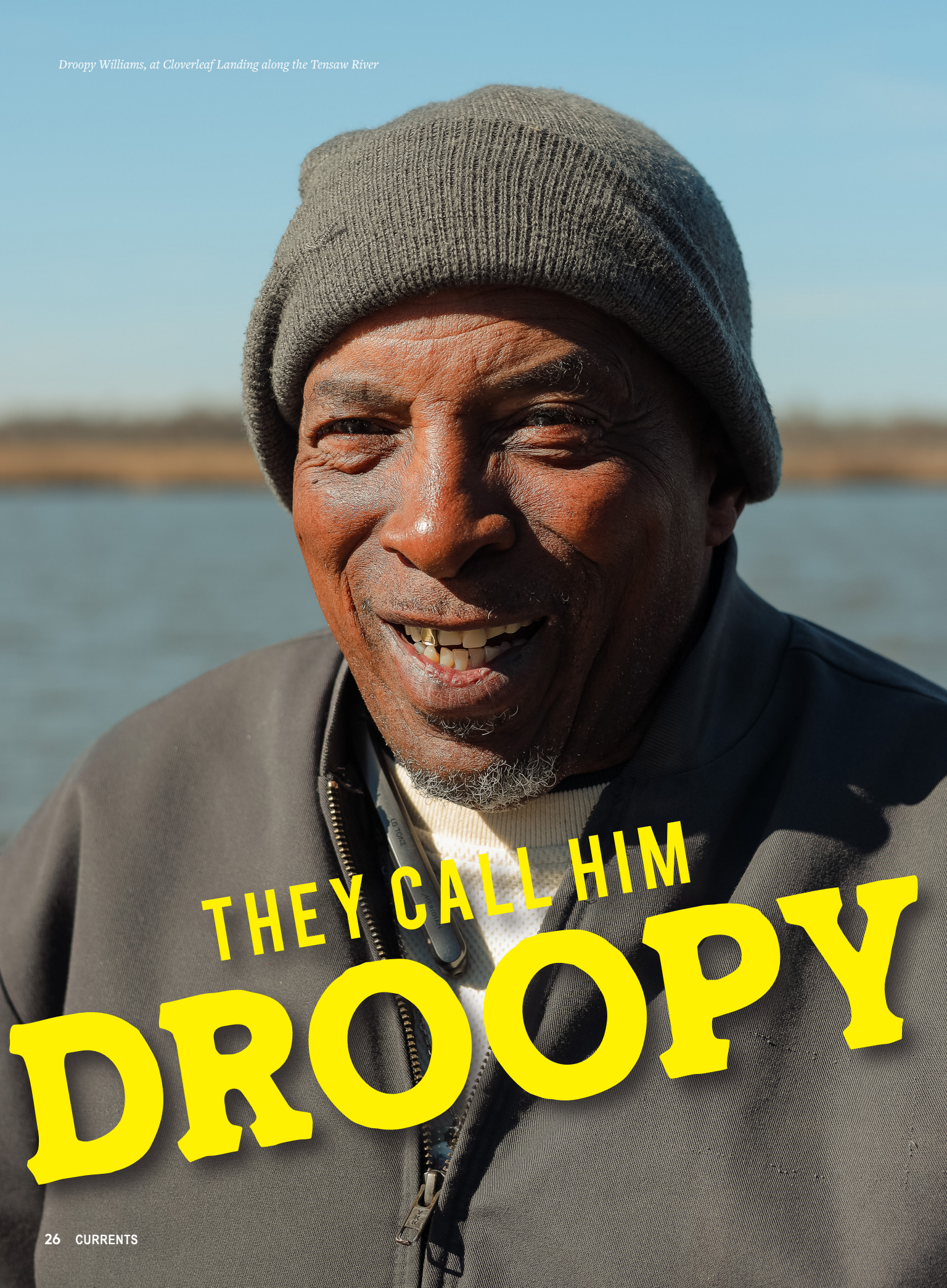
"The music business is really hard," Molly admits. "It's a tough game, and there's so much risk involved. I always wonder if I should go back to school and get another degree, but just like the push and pull of the ocean and that metaphor that seems to constantly lead my life, music has always come back to me in some form. Even before the accident, if I had decided I couldn't live this life anymore, someone would come up to me somewhere and say, 'You know that song you wrote? I was going through something, and it really helped me get through it.' And I would say okay, this really is my ministry. My father was a minister so I guess that's how I see it. I try to leave religion out of it, but I am a very spiritual person, and there are too many signals that say, 'This is what you're supposed to do.' When I try to think of my life any other way, I always end up in these conversations with myself, and I always end up in the same place: picking up my violin."

After almost losing her life, much less her physical ability to create and perform, her choice to return to music means so much more. Even the title of the album, *Tumble Home*, originally a lyric from another song on the album, became synonymous with her recovery and her journey back to music.

"It's actually a nautical term," Molly explains. "In every ship there is a part that is referenced to as the 'tumble home,' and it's what keeps the boat from tipping, what keeps it upright. After the wreck, I realized the connection, and suddenly 'tumble home' become a double entendre. The metaphors around this thing are godly; I'm telling you, it's weird. I don't spend a whole lot of time thinking about it, but that's why I'm grateful for conversations like this because it reminds me of these cool things that I need to be more conscious of."

With a new record set to be released in May, Molly feels hopeful about the future of her music.

"As hard as it is to relive it, I really appreciate opportunities like this to remember my story because it reminds me of these epiphanies that have come," Molly says. "You live your life and you go on about your business, and all of a sudden you forget that lesson you just learned. My grandmother always told me that I had a gift and that it was my responsibility to share it with people. When I sit down and compose a song or a string arrangement, I follow the flow of the work, and it kind of takes care of itself. For so long I thought everybody was like that, but come to find out not everybody can do that, and it is a gift. The wreck taught me to embrace this gift, giving me permission in a way to continue to pursue this path of music and art and songwriting. Everybody has their special thing that they do; mine just happens to be this."



Droopy Williams, at Cloverleaf Landing along the Tensaw River

THEY CALL HIM DROOPY

LESSONS FROM A LIFE-LONG SHRIMPER

by **CAINE O'REAR**
photos by **COURTNEY MASON**

Every Delta fisherman knows Droopy Williams. Or at least knows of him. You've probably seen him as you've zoomed along the Causeway – a sort of roving landmark, sometimes in the waters above the highway, sometimes below.

For nearly six decades he has been a shrimper for the bait shops along that raised ground between Spanish Fort and the city. I say shops. Once there were a dozen or more, but now there is only one.

Droopy Williams grew up in the Delta in a cabin on the Tensaw River at Cloverleaf Landing. He was raised by his grandparents. Since he was a kid he has been called by that name. He says most folks don't know his real name (don't expect to get it here) but there is one who does – his aunt is Lucy "Pie" Hollings, proprietress of the Cloverleaf boat launch and a local Delta legend. The family lived off the land and water when he was growing up; crabbing, running trotlines, and raising hogs and cows on Gravine Island just across the river. They were different days indeed.

These days, driving into Mobile in the early morning hours, you might catch him working the Blakeley River in his 24-foot trawler, the words **LIVE BAIT** painted in bold red lettering on the side. It's a reassuring sight. For all the change behind us and all that lies ahead, no matter what comes you can rest assured that the sun rises, the sun goes down, and that Droopy is out there catching shrimp.

At age thirteen he went to work for Autrey's Fish Camp, as soon as school let out for summer, and it was during those summer months that he first lived on the Causeway with Billy and Queenie Wright, who ran the shop. It was the mid-1960s and everybody fished. In those days you could rent boats by the hour at Autrey's or Stauter Boat Works, and try your luck for redfish or trout on your lunch break. It was a sort of Golden Age, but of course all that changed in '69 when Camille showed up like a woman scorned and let everyone know the party was over.

In his years on the water, Droopy has seen all manner of change. There has been sustained development, increased dredging operations, and an oil spill, to name just a few of the things that have left their mark. These days the shrimp are smaller and the fish are less plentiful. There are more gators and bald eagles, but fewer snakes. The hogs his family once raised on Gravine Island are no more, but their progeny now run wild and roam the woods of the upper Delta. There is only one bait shop left standing on the Causeway, for which he still supplies shrimp, and as Williams is a bait shrimper, not a licensed commercial operator, he can only sell directly to bait shops.

Droopy is the only Black shrimper on the local scene — a fact he seems to take pride in. He's tried to take on numerous deckhands, but it's tough work and most can't cut it, so these days he prefers to work solo. He says he doesn't mind going it alone though: every changing wind and tide is like a greeting from an old friend.

Today he lives on Cloverleaf Landing, just up the road from where he grew up, shrimping in the morning and fishing for bream most afternoons, and he says there is no better place on Earth to live.

We met up with him one cold, January morning at Cloverleaf when the tide was low. We couldn't launch the boat, so we stood on the bank and heard his many tales of a life on the water.

The Name Droopy

Droopy: I was going to school on a cold day just like today. I used to be drooped over like this because I thought I was being cute. I had been working since I

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was twelve years old and had money in my pocket. You know how it is when you think you're being cute around girls and stuff? You don't wear much clothing like everybody else. I would be cold and I would be drooped over like this and they started calling me Droopy. Ever since the ninth grade, everybody calls me Droopy.

First Day Shrimping

It was in the '60s. I was 13. Back then we had wooden doors on the back of the boat, and a little old 16-foot net, on a Stauter-Built boat. The first time I tried to go out, I was young and not paying attention and the ropes got wrapped around my foot ... and I'm trying to turn the gear-shift down and get my foot out of the rope.

With shrimping, you're going to learn from your mistakes. You make a mistake that you're not going to want to make no more out there, because it's quick, and it just happens so fast on the water. I tell folks all the time: if it can happen, one day it will happen. I have fallen overboard before. The worst could happen out there one day. I pray every time I go out. I ask the Lord to bless me and watch over me. There's so much stuff on the water you don't see. You pray that the Lord watch over you for things you don't see. You're fine with the things you do see.

Growing Up Cloverleaf

We had cows and hogs up on Gravine Island. We had what you call "Killin' Day." Go up there and kill something and bring it back in for the family. We lived off the fat of the land. We made everything. We ground our own corn. Everything we had, we made it, except stuff like flour, sugar, baking powder. A lot of the hogs they're saying are wild now were just some of our hogs that got away and stranded off of Gravine Island, and started populating all over the place.

It started changing when people starting buying the land along the river. They weren't poachers but you didn't know who it was.

I lived with my grandaddy and grandmother. And then after Clarise died, Aunt Pie took over. There used to be a little bait shop my grandaddy owned. That was all done in '66 and stuff. Me and my brother, we lived with Billy and Queenie Rice for about three years at Miss Autrey's Fishing Camp. We didn't come home. When school got out for the final day, they were sitting in our yard waiting for us to get out and go to work.

I was making money. It wasn't a whole lot of money but it didn't take a whole lot of money back in '66. It was a whole different scene, with Lawrence Stauter around. Everyone was like family, back then.

The Competition

The hardest part today is the era that we shrimp in. You got some guys who throw off five or ten minutes before daylight, and we're not supposed to throw off till daylight. Everybody's trying to beat the other guy to it. So the competition is getting harder and harder.

At 5:30 in the morning, when the shrimp are out there in October and November, you have nine other bait boats out there, shrimping in the Blakeley River. Most times you get one or two good drags in. The rest of the time you're scratching for bait. If you don't get all you want in two drags ... you might be out there till twelve or one o' clock, because there are so many boats.

The Best

I got people — I don't know why — who think I'm the best shrimper that ever put a net in the water. But I'm not good with all the technology stuff. The young guys, they pinpoint and they pinpoint. You go out there in the fall and I'm sitting there at the dock waiting for the fog to lift. The young guys get hung up and they mark it. I get hung up, and then I get hung up on it again because I don't mark it.

When the other guys don't come in or they don't catch em, they say, "I guess I better call Droopy to catch some." But I can't catch them if they ain't out there. If they ain't out there, they just ain't out there!

Changes

The shrimping has changed so much. Now you have all the restricted areas. We used to could shrimp all throughout the Bay. Now Weeks Bay is closed down for shrimping, and you can't shrimp over on the Eastern Shore. When we used to shrimp there in the Tensaw — all the commercial boats were there. Shrimp haven't been big like that in years. It used to be 20 or 30 boats there, and you never ran out of shrimp. The shrimp population has really, really diminished over the years.

I didn't have my own boat till 2015. I always shrimped for somebody else with a shop boat. Ain't nothing like having your own rig.

Today bait shrimpers are not allowed to shrimp nowhere hardly. In the ship channel, bait shrimpers are in there fighting with commercial shrimp boats with 50-foot nets. They only allow us to pull a 16-foot net. We got to pull it up within twenty minutes. You never know if [the wardens] are sitting by the Battleship looking at you, and when you get into the dock you got a ticket or something — for dragging too long. We used to could drag as long as we wanted to. We are competing against 50- foot nets. The big boats just push us over out of the way in the channel.

We are the little guys. We got what you call a bait license. We can't have no more than two baskets of shrimp on the boat at any given time. That's like a 150 pounds of shrimp — 3,000 shrimp in the tank. It has to be sold to the bait shop. If you pull up to me on the water, I'm not allowed to sell you shrimp. We could lose our license for selling bait off a boat. You got to wait around till the boat come in. And we've got to try to keep the shrimp alive. We pretty much didn't even have pumps on the boat when I come up. We had the Stauter-Built boats where the water rotated in and out, in and out.

The shrimping started changing back in '99. Most people want to blame it on the oil spill. Everything nowadays is blamed on the oil spill. I don't know how true it is. Like I said I've been doing it all my life. I know there is a big change in shrimping. There was a time around the oil spill when we struggled to catch shrimp. But with everything going on with the crab, the shrimp ... there are not as many. You might have two weeks of trout fishing. It's not that good anymore.

Dredging

I know it hurt us. They might stay in 30 foot of water and dredge. But when they drop that big ball it just leaves a big hole and a lot of times we fall in it and get hung up ... We might drag our net trying to rinse the mud out. The dredge always affects us because we sometimes don't have nowhere else to go but the ship channel [depending on the season] ... With the pipeline they were pumping it on the flats and stuff — it changes things a lot.

We know the dredging gotta be done, but when you're up in an area like this, you can't dredge this area. Everything is filling in. From Tensaw and Blakeley Point, it used to be deep water. Now, it's just

ALABAMA 2023 OCT
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2024 OCT
BAIT

Droopy's 24-foot trawler

not that deep. Everything is filling in so much. It's not for the best.

I think it's a good thing y'all are doing that you don't want that mud dumping. We need dredging but you need to have somewhere to put it. When I used to be out there, they had them dikes and they put it all in Polecat Bay. Now, you're pumping it out on the flats out there.

Trash in the Water

You might see a fish and turtle with an old Wal-Mart bag in the water. Mardi Gras time you find a lot of footballs and different stuff in the water.

I don't throw nothing out on the water. I catch so much stuff in the shrimp trawl. Ninety percent is stuff that comes from humans. They don't care. They love to fish but they don't love to take care of it. Everyone should have a trash can on the boat. A five-gallon bucket or something. I've got a bucket where I keep all of my bottles and stuff.

Across the River and Back

We learned to swim in this area right here on the Tensaw. We used to swim across the river and back. With the alligators, yes. I never was scared. We did have a cousin who drowned — Sherman. He was standing up in the boat. Throwed him over and he didn't make it.

There used to be a lot more water moccasins. Very seldom you see one now. When I'm bream fishing I see one or two swim across the creek a year. There used to be so many nutria and stuff. Everything would open up. Then all of this just filled in.

You wouldn't believe how many alligators are out right now. Normally in December and January you never see gators. But with these warm days we've been having, you see plenty of gators out. You see quite a few wild hogs and stuff. I don't take no gun in the boat out there. It makes you wanna shoot at everything you see, so I don't take no gun out there.

The Old Days

There were way more people catching fish. All of the bait shops had pretty good business. Autrey's Fishing Camp was the number one fishing shop on the Causeway. Competition was plentiful.

Audrey and them had 25 rental boats — all 25 boats would be rented out. We had people fishing that would sit and wait to get a boat to go out. You had some people that weren't going to stay long. We know who they was and they'd come back in. Me and my brother we'd jump in the boat with a bucket. A lot of the boats didn't have motors. We'd just paddle the boat out and fish and stuff.

There were three or four gas stations on the Causeway. I remember when gas was 36 cents a gallon. Cheapest gas I ever remembered was right there at Pinto Island.

I was living on the Causeway with the Wrights when Camille come over there. I remember stepping out of the house with power lines down after the hurricane. We were so young, just barefooted, stepping out of the house and feeling the electric shock. We didn't know what it was. Me and my brother Tippin went down there in 1966 and worked for them. Mrs. Queenie Wright had 70-something boat sheds and all of them had boats in them. By '89 or something they started stealing motors and stuff off the boats through the night. Then it started getting bad for boat renovating. Me and my brother

The cabin at Cloverleaf where Droopy was raised

would stay around to keep people from stealing motors at night. All the big-time people kept their boats in the sheds.

Pollution

To my knowledge I haven't seen much pollution but quite sure there is. With the coal dock, years ago you could go and catch fish at the coal dock and they didn't taste like nothing. But now you throw a cast net there and catch mullet and hang around that area, you can't hardly eat them.

Not Lonely

Ninety-five percent of the time I'm out solo. Very seldom I have anybody out on the boat with me. I always welcome somebody to go out with me, and there is always somebody promising me they'll go with me. Sometime I guess I leave out too early for them. I say, "Be at the dock at 5:30" and they're not there. They say, "You left." Well I say, "You *wanna* go, I *gotta* go."

My love for the water and stuff makes me not get lonely. I bream fish a lot. I'll probably go get my motor and go bream fishing in a minute. A lot of times I fish by myself. It don't get boring and it don't get lonely or nothing.

The waves are my friends. I don't like it when it gets real rough. It's cool when it's smooth. After sitting around a while you says, "Ain't none of my little friends out here today" and then all the sudden the wind will make a ripple in the water and the next thing you know, they're big friends, the bigger waves.

The Doll Baby

I once caught a doll baby. I thought I had caught a real baby. That was really scary stuff — when you pull your net up and you don't know what you got in it. I saved the doll but I couldn't tell you where it is now.

Black Folks Shrimping

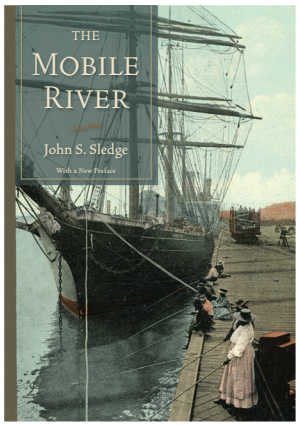
Relatives of mine see me going and they went and got boats. As a job, you might have some Black deckhands on some of the big boats. But not in this area, never. Out of all the people I ever took out, my grandson, he could operate it. He could do the wench. But after he got older — he's 21 now — he likes to go out with me when I go, but he's not interested in taking over.

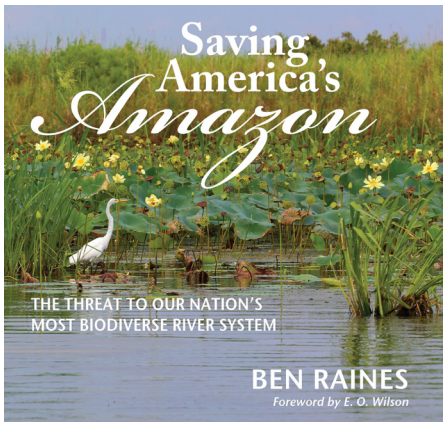
The Good Life

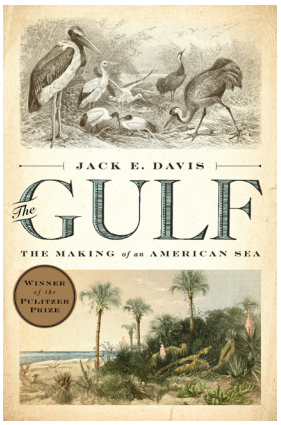
I'm not a bank fisherman. I love to fish out of a boat. I like having access to the water. Fish in the morning, come in and have lunch, and then go back fishing that evening. Lot of times that's what I'll do. I'll saltwater fish in the fall in the morning time, and then I'll bream fish in the evening time for freshwater fish. Specks, reds, a lot of white trout in the saltwater. We had more white trout this year. Through the years, ever since I been up here, we usually caught white trout. This year we caught white trout weighing two or three pounds. What everybody calls croakers, a trash fish, we catch two-pound croakers up here in June and July, up here at this piling. We fish for them. And always with dead shrimp.

I don't want to live no place else. Ain't no place no greater to live. I love the water. I can always just run down here.

This interview was edited and condensed for length. Scan the QR code to watch video interviews of Droopy Williams at Cloverleaf.







Required Reading

OUTDOORSMAN NICK WILLIAMS SELECTS THE ESSENTIAL BOOKS ABOUT OUR WATERSHED

by **NICK WILLIAMS**

As the editor of a local print magazine in publication for nearly thirty years, I was thrilled when William Strickland first shared that CURRENTS was in the works. I'm a fan of print. Sure, digital media is cheaper, more convenient, and often allows writers to reach a wider audience. But is that always a good thing?

Call me a hipster, a Luddite, or whatever you like, but the value of print lies in the fact that it is (apologies to the editor) a royal pain to produce and consume. Anyone — and I mean anyone — can publish a blog or social media post. And anyone with thirty seconds to spare in a checkout line can read it. I know this because I both publish and read plenty of online content, professionally and recreationally.

It's not all bad, but gossip, slander, misinformation, conspiracy theories, pseudoscience, and other journalistic junk flourish in the digital world because there are no barriers to entry or production costs to weed out the worst of it. It's like a factory churning out cheap hot dogs: grind it up, stuff it, and sell it. If you make enough and price it low enough, someone will consume it, regardless of what's inside.

If blog posts and social media snippets are cheap hot dogs, books are a three-course meal at a formal restaurant. While there's no guarantee of an exceptional experience, significant time, effort, and money go into the process. Your odds are good.

Books generally take years to write, let alone edit and publish. A hot-take blog post? Days, at best. It seems reasonable to assume that if someone spent years crafting a book, it's worth a few hours of my time to read it.

The more serious the topic, the more critical it is to seek reliable, well-researched information. To me, there is no topic more important than rivers. All human endeavors depend on them, and regardless of political affiliation, race, or socioeconomic status, clean air, water, and food are essential to everyone's well-being.

Below is a non-exhaustive list of books I consider essential reading for anyone seeking to deepen their understanding of the Mobile-Tensaw Delta waterway. Over two decades of "getting to know" the Delta have taught me that understanding a river requires a multidisciplinary approach. Grasping its ecology and natural history is crucial, as is appreciating its human history — always astonishingly brief in comparison. And beyond the list of wealthy names and bloody dates lies the soul of a river: the poetry and folklore it inspires. These books cover "all the bases," and I unreservedly recommend them to you.

Gone to the Swamp: Raw Materials for the Good Life in the Mobile-Tensaw Delta

By Robert Leslie Smith

"...I have felt the need to record — for those to come — some remembrances of a time when the Delta was not a playground."

So begins one of the most fascinating books I've had the pleasure of reading. Partly a local history, partly an anthology of stories, and partly an autobiography, this book offers a unique look at what "the Delta" was like before it was protected under Forever Wild. It paints a vivid picture of what logging activities looked like "in the old days," back when teams of oxen were still the best and surest way to extract timber from the muddy swamps.

As a Stockton resident and avid sportsmen, I came to this book with the expectation of a few good stories, but walked away with insights into local landmarks that I didn't expect. From stories of black-bear hunts on the Baldwin County Hunting Club to the origins of the Red Hills Spring watering hole, it left me with a much deeper understanding of and appreciation for my small corner of the world.

The Gulf: The Making of an American Sea

By Jack E. Davis

Jack Davis' *The Gulf* offers a broad, sweeping, environmental history of the Gulf Coast, stretching all the way back to the Spanish Conquistadors and culminating in the modern "Condominium Conquest" of the Gulf. It's required reading for anyone looking to understand the history, ecology, and culture of the Gulf Coast region. While primarily interested in the ecology of the area and its impact on the history and culture, it makes plenty of room to discuss the invention of Tabasco sauce, the history of tarpon fishing, the roots of Yankee ingenuity in the commercial fishing industry, and the colorful reflections of Ocean Springs' reclusive artist, Walter Anderson.

It also covers more serious topics, such as the steady decline of the commercial fishing industry, the replacement of mangrove swamps and tidal marshes with condominiums and golf-course communities, and the impacts of the Deepwater Horizon spill. Whether you're a recent transplant or a lifelong resident, *The Gulf* will help you settle your roots in the sandy soils of the Gulf Coast.

Southern Rivers: Restoring America's Freshwater Biodiversity

By R. Scot Duncan

"Despite their economic and cultural importance, rivers are invisible to most who live in the Southeast ... They sink into the landscape, veiled behind curtains of forest or guarded by No Trespassing signs. Most people only ever see rivers through windshields from bridges. It takes an act of pilgrimage to stand beside a creek or river. This invisibility must end because southeastern rivers are in crisis."

As somebody who has fished almost every county and every river in Alabama, Scot's opening words in the preface to *Southern Rivers* resonate deeply with me. Our rivers are beautiful, full of history, and, for the most part, loaded with fish.

On the other hand, spawning fish die at the base of dams that block eons-old migration routes. Sediment runoff from new construction chokes their tributaries. Their banks are collapsing as timber is harvested from them. Waste from power plants, paper mills, chemical plants, timber operations, and a myriad of other sources poisons their waters, their fishes, and then the families of the fishermen who line their banks.

The bad news, according to Scot, is that our rivers have serious problems. The good news, which is often left out in environmental books, is that we know how to solve them. I finished the book with the same "cautious optimism" that the author himself shares. We have the knowledge, the tools, and even the time to save some of the most important rivers in the world. The question is, do we have the will?

The Mobile River

by John S. Sledge

John Sledge has written enough on the history and culture of the Lower Coastal Plain that he deserves his own list. It was tough to narrow a recommendation down to one particular book, but I feel that *The Mobile River*, which is now available in paperback with a new preface, sits nicely on a small shelf in between Jack Davis' sweeping *The Gulf* and more focused local histories such as *Gone to the Swamp*. The Mobile River, measured in miles, is not a particularly large river. But when you measure its history and the impact it has had on the rest of the country, as Sledge does, you'll find that few rivers are as momentous.

The topic is riveting, the writing engaging, and the color and black-and-white images compliment the storytelling beautifully. Of particular interest is a color image of a Civil War-era map of Mobile Bay drawn by Union engineers in preparation for the Battle of Mobile Bay. Duck hunters and anglers will observe that Duckers and Polecat Bay both looked very different in the 1880s than they do today, having been mostly filled in and cut off from the surrounding waterways by sediment trapped by the Causeway and Bayway.

If you've ever strolled through the History Museum of Mobile or the National Maritime Museum and left wanting more, John S. Sledge is your man, and *The Mobile River* is a fantastic introduction to his body of work.

The Tensaw River: Alabama's Hidden Heritage Corridor

By Mike Bunn

The winner writes history, and the Mobile side of the Bay has always been the "winner" in terms of economic, industrial, and political power. A lifelong Eastern Shore resident who has ranged from Foley to Stockton, this has always rankled my feathers a bit.

I was thrilled to add Mike Bunn's *The Tensaw River* to my bookshelves last year. The most recently published book in this list, it's also the shortest, which makes it rank higher, not lower, on my list. Good writers get in and get out, and Mike is obviously a good writer. The pages are packed with history, and this book makes for a wonderful dashboard companion on an expedition up State Route 225 and Highway 59 to "see the sights." From Spanish Fort, to Blakeley, to the Stagecoach, to Fort Mims, and everywhere in between, this book tells the often forgotten story of "the other half" of the Mobile-Tensaw.

In the Realm of Rivers: Alabama's Mobile-Tensaw Delta

Written by Sue Walker, Photos by Dennis Holt

One of my life's happiest accidents was deciding to use my one-and-only elective course credit to enroll in *Creative Writing II* at the University of South Alabama, which was an advanced poetry composition course that I had absolutely no business being involved in. It was taught by Dr. Sue Walker, who at the time was Alabama's Poet Laureate.

Dr. Walker very generously gave me enough encouragement in my flounderings to make me realize that I enjoyed writing almost as much as I enjoyed reading, something that quite literally changed the course of my life. It wasn't until after I had graduated that I learned she had produced a coffee table book alongside photographer Dennis Holt. It took a couple of years and an embarrassing amount of money to track down the copy I just had to have.

Any attempt to summarize or explain their work would be totally inadequate. Instead, I'll let Dr. Walker's poetry speak for both itself and for one of my favorite waterways in the Delta.

Standing on the bank of Bayou Tallapoosa
it is possible to believe
how the sound of wind
in cypress crowns
are prevailing psalms,
chanted celebrations

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of a sheened and sheening earth
singing supplejack and muscadine,
willow and wisteria,
ibis and sparrow,
singing salamander and bass,
eagle and otter,
and the human being, like to a tree
planted by water-rivers
in season yields fruit
and the leaf never withers
as all who join in communion
give thanks,
give thanks.

Among the Swamp People: Life In Mobile, Alabama's River Delta

By Watt Key

I've never had the pleasure of conversation with Mr. Key, but I have had the pleasure of meeting his friends. "Crazy Dan," the eccentric but kind-hearted character who Key recounts as dancing in the flames of a sunken houseboat as it burns down, is as real as the nose on my face. I hunt every year over some duck decoys that he gave me. And some CURRENTS readers may recall that the proprietress of Cloverleaf Landing, Ms. Lucy "Pie" Hollings, is also a character who is somehow even more interesting in person than she is in Watt's colorful stories.

In *Among the Swamp People*, Key breathes life into the human side of the Delta. His stories are by turns outrageously funny and poignant, and anybody who has spent any time themselves in the company of "Swamp People" will know that this is a "real-deal" account of camp-life in the Delta.

Bottle Creek Reflections: The Personal Side of Archaeology in the Mobile-Tensaw Delta

By Ian W. Brown

On my desk sits a small collection of pottery shards taken from the ever-eroding banks of my own backyard. I've spent hours looking at them and wondering about the people who made them. What songs did they sing? What jokes did they make? Did they take their gods literally or figuratively? Sadly, we know more about the surface of Mars than we'll likely ever know about the peoples who thrived along the Gulf Coast before the arrival of the Spaniards.

I picked up *Bottle Creek Reflections* hoping to learn more about the mounds and middens that dot the Mobile-Tensaw Delta, and the people who made them. And I did learn a little bit about that, but what I learned a lot more about is what it was like to be a college student digging in the dirt and swatting mosquitoes in the early '90s.

Bottle Creek Reflections offers a fascinating look at life in the Mobile-Tensaw through the lens of Mr. Brown's personal diary entries chronicling his time spent at the Bottle Creek mound site. The writing itself is superb, with hair-raising accounts of cottonmouths, surprise thunderstorms, and foggy, nighttime barge encounters. Complimenting his firsthand account are numerous candid photographs and sketches depicting everything from artifacts to timber-company helicopters refueling on river barges.

At some point in reading through his tales of tribulations and camaraderie, I realized that maybe we know more about the Bottle Creek residents than I supposed. They, too, undoubtedly cursed the heat and the bugs, huddled together in awe of the summer storms, and laughed until they fell over at the minor misfortunes of their friends.

Southern Water, Southern Power: How the Politics of Cheap Energy and Water Scarcity Shaped a Region

By Christopher J. Manganiello

It is, admittedly, a bit of a stretch to sneak a book on the Savannah River into a list of required reading for Mobile Bay residents. But I make no apologies. Those who don't learn their history are, after all, doomed to repeat it, and the history of Atlanta's water woes may very well foreshadow the history of Alabama's.

At the heart of Manganiello's account of the history and politics of the Atlanta and surrounding region's water and power woes lies two massive characters: Southern Power Company and the US Army Corps of Engineers. This book tells the story of how these two massively powerful avatars of Big Business and Big Government have made, for better or worse, decisions for the rest of "us folks" on how our waterways are to be utilized. It's an all-too-common tale of short-term thinking, privatized profits and socialized consequences, and private wealth being built from public resources. With the current troubles over coal ash and mud dumping in our own state, it's a worthwhile read for those who wish to be informed.

Saving America's Amazon: The Threat to Our Nation's Most Biodiverse River System

By Ben Raines

"Hidden away in the heart of Dixie, one of the nation's greatest wildernesses is being destroyed, bit by bit, in a silent massacre."

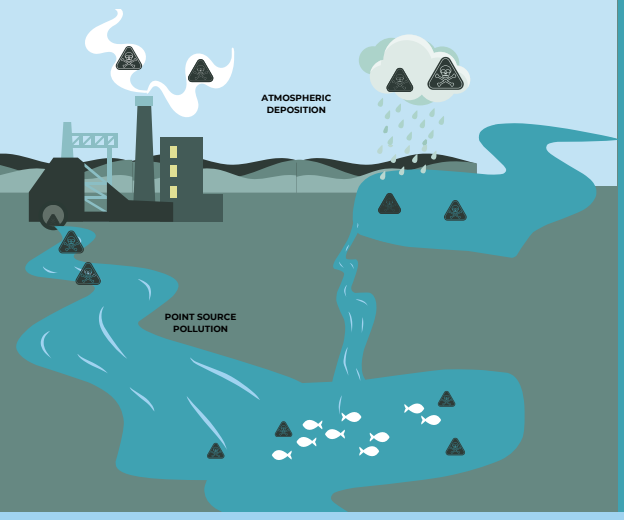
If it was up to me, this gem of a book would be required reading for every Alabama citizen. Ben Raines does a phenomenal job showing both the Delta's incredible ecological richness and the real and pressing threats to its survival. The writing is tight and engaging, and the pictures really are worth a thousand words each. His last chapter, "Protecting the Edges," is sadly proving to be prophetic, as development encroaches more and more upon the countless streams and creeks that feed lifeblood into the Mobile-Tensaw Delta and Mobile Bay.

This book hits close to home. One can read it, cover to cover, in an afternoon, and then go hop in a car or boat for an evening excursion to see both the beautiful and ugly side of the Delta that Ben points out.

An Honored Place on the Shelf

It's my belief that the bookshelf should occupy as prominent a place in households as the television set, and that local books should have an honored place on that shelf. While I've accepted that life is far too short to allow me time to read every book worth reading, that knowledge hasn't stopped me. If you feel that I've omitted a local classic from this list, I'd love to know about it. Send me a message about it at *nickwilliams@greatdaysoutdoors.com*, and I promise I'll read it.

HOW DO POLLUTANTS END UP IN FISH?

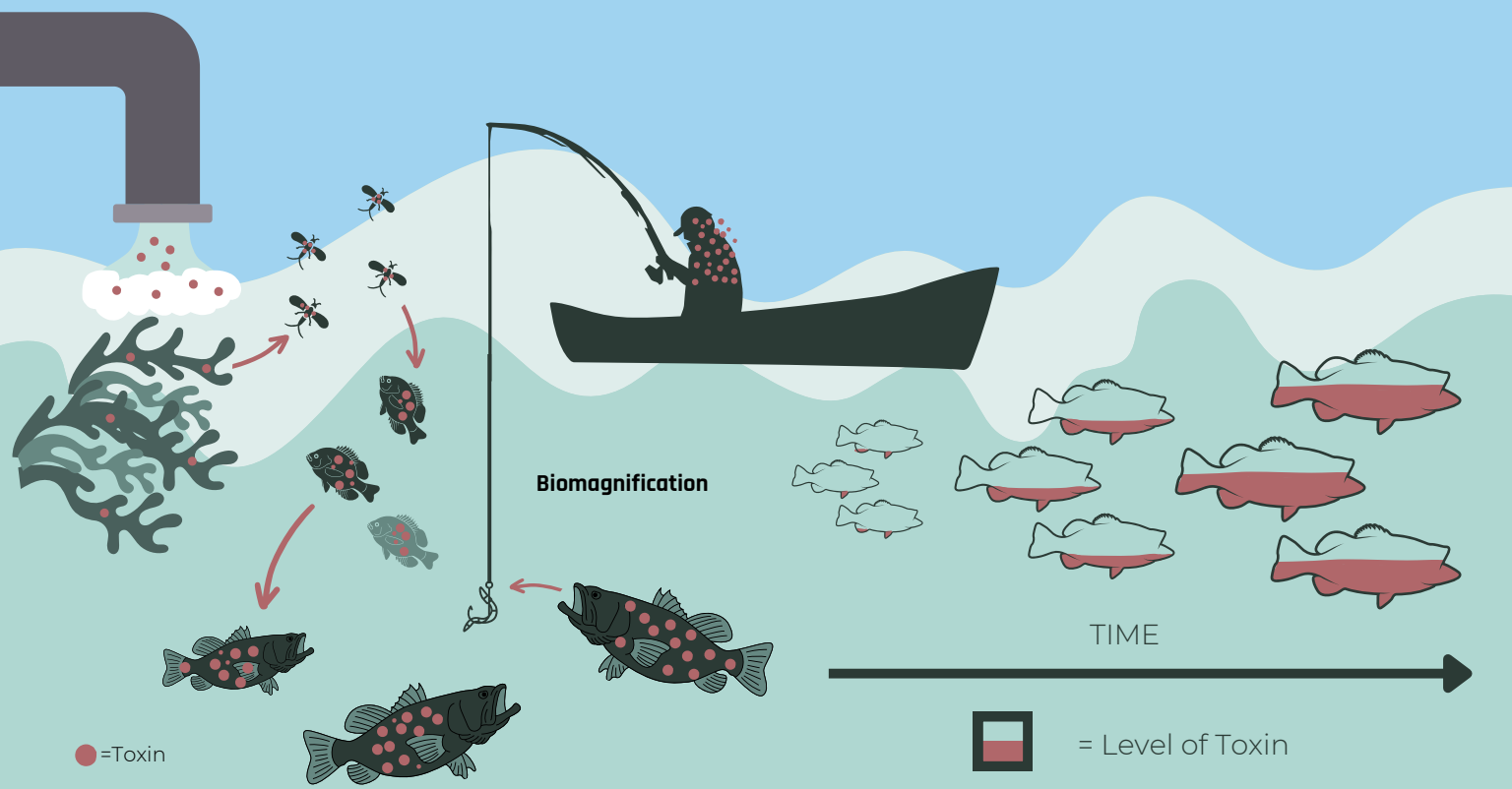


and why does it matter?

Fish can be exposed to a variety of chemical compounds and toxic heavy metals in the environment. These pollutants enter waterways from industrial, agricultural, and wastewater treatment operations in the form of air emissions, point source runoff, or eroding sediment. Once contaminants enter aquatic ecosystems, fish can absorb them through their gills and skin or by eating food. Toxins build within fish tissue and increase over a lifetime as the rate of accumulation exceeds breakdown. Additionally, as predatory fish consume prey, these pollutants transfer and magnify in concentration up the food chain.

What are the human health impacts from consuming contaminated fish?

People are not exempt from this dilemma as we become exposed to chemicals via fish consumption and other forms of exposure to water. The state performs regular testing and issue advisories for species and waterways in which pollutant concentrations exceed limitations meant to protect us from harm. Health concerns such as cancer, developmental impairments, and neurological issues are not immediate but gradual risks if we eat great quantities of contaminated fish over time.



WHAT ARE WE DOING TO HELP?

Mobile Baykeeper works towards real and measurable improvement in the health of the waters of Coastal Alabama by identifying and reducing sources of pollutants that contaminate fish and affect our families. We tackle issues by finding practical solutions to reduce pollutants in our water, involving the improvement of toxic standards and encouraging folks to voluntarily cut back on substances that could harm our environment.

1 Review pollutants tested by the State for issuance of fish consumption advisories.

2 Identify point sources directly contributing to the presence of these pollutants in fish.

3 Improve legal criteria for toxics and increase volunteer reductions to reduce pollutants contributing to consumption advisories.

A SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH CENTER IS NEEDED IN THE DELTA

by **GABRIEL DE OLIVEIRA**

The Mobile-Tensaw Delta is an incredibly important and diverse coastal ecosystem that plays a significant role in both local and global environmental health. It is often referred to as "North America's Amazon" due to its immense biodiversity, housing a variety of plant and animal species. However, this vital area has been severely affected by human activities over the years, including logging, development, and alterations to natural water flow. In addition to these issues, climate change has started to have more noticeable effects, further stressing the delicate balance of the Delta's ecosystems.

Climate change brings a variety of challenges, both on land and in water, and the Mobile-Tensaw Delta is no exception. On land, rising temperatures, shifting rainfall patterns, and changes in the types of plants that can thrive are all directly linked to climate change. These alterations can have wide-reaching effects on the overall health of the environment. For instance, when certain plant species are unable to survive in changing conditions, it disrupts the natural cycles of the area, which can lead to a loss of biodiversity. In aquatic areas, problems like rising sea levels and saltier water are increasingly common. These issues, combined with changing flood patterns, further stress plant life and disrupt the delicate balance of water flow and carbon movement that the Delta relies on.

As the climate continues to shift, extreme weather events, such as droughts and floods, are becoming more frequent and intense. These events not only harm plant life but also interfere with the way carbon is stored and managed in the environment. Plants, especially trees, play a crucial role in absorbing carbon from the atmosphere and storing it in the soil. When plant life is damaged by extreme weather or when land is cleared for development, the amount of carbon the environment can absorb decreases. This contributes to the overall increase in carbon in the atmosphere, further accelerating climate change. Changes in plant types, land use, and weather patterns can therefore have a domino effect, disrupting how energy, water, and carbon are managed within an ecosystem.

In order to understand the full impact of climate change on environments like the Mobile-Tensaw Delta, scientists have been using specialized tools and techniques for over 20 years. These tools help track how energy, water, and carbon move through the environment, allowing researchers to monitor the effects of climate change in real time. However, despite this long period of study, there is still much to learn about how climate change and human activities are affecting these delicate ecosystems.

One key aspect of addressing climate change is understanding which ecosystems, agricultural practices, and land management methods are most effective at conserving water and carbon. This knowledge is especially crucial for the Mobile-Tensaw Delta, where the combination of natural beauty and ecological importance requires careful protection and management. As global temperatures rise, many areas will face hotter conditions and more water scarcity, so knowing which ecosystems and methods can adapt and thrive under these conditions is vital for reducing the impact of climate change.

In light of these challenges, setting up a research center in the Mobile-Tensaw Delta focused on tracking water and carbon would provide invaluable insights into how to best manage the region's resources. Such a center could monitor how these elements move through the Delta and assess how climate change, along with human activities, is affecting the area. This research could also help develop strategies for better conservation practices and for protecting the areas of the Delta that store large amounts of carbon.

In addition to benefiting local ecosystems, this research could have broader implications for businesses and industries that are involved in water management, food production, and carbon trading. By learning more about how the Delta stores and manages carbon, researchers could create carbon credit markets that reward landowners or organizations for preserving areas that act as carbon sinks. This could provide a financial incentive for conservation efforts, helping to protect important ecosystems like the Mobile-Tensaw Delta while simultaneously addressing the global issue of carbon emissions.

This research could contribute valuable educational materials for universities and colleges, raising awareness about the importance of protecting vital ecosystems. The Delta is not only an important region for Alabama but also plays a critical role in the overall health of the United States' environmental systems. Protecting it from the effects of climate change and human development is essential for both the local community and the planet as a whole.

The Mobile-Tensaw Delta is a unique and vital ecosystem that faces numerous challenges due to human activity and climate change. By investing in research and conservation efforts, we can gain a deeper understanding of how water and carbon move through this area and learn how best to protect it. This will not only benefit the Delta itself but also provide valuable insights that can be applied to other ecosystems facing similar issues. Protecting the Mobile-Tensaw Delta is a crucial step in ensuring the health of the environment for future generations.

Gabriel de Oliveira is an assistant professor at the Stokes School of Marine & Environmental Sciences at the University of South Alabama.

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